DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 357 413 EA 024 608

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TITLE From Diversity to Identity: Schools Where Everyone Belongs.
PUB DATE 7 Oct 92
NOTE 21p.; Workshop presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Education Association (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, October 7, 1992).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Awareness; *Cultural Differences; Educational Environment; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; *Intercultural Communication; Minority Groups; *Multicultural Education; Public Schools; *Social Integration
IDENTIFIERS *Canada; *Diversity (Student)

ABSTRACT

Schools are an important source of personal identity and group integration. In Canada, schools are better equipped to contribute to both individual and group identities than they are to be agents of general social integration. The central goal of schools is to provide quality education, and part of this mission is being more confident and creative in how students from varied backgrounds are taught. Across Canada, many teachers are struggling to meet the special needs of diverse students while maintaining some educational norms. Educators also are uncomfortable with having to be agents of social integration of not only students, but families as well. Two factors influence the legitimacy of how diversity is perceived in education. One, difference is not perceived objectively. Two, externally recognized differences may not be viewed by the individual as legitimate or familiar. A useful framework for understanding diversity and the role of schools might be that the school is one identity, its members another, and a third, their identities outside the school. The challenge of schools is to create a shared identity and goals that complement, not oppose, students' own identities. (JPT)

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FROM DIVERSITY TO IDENTITY;

SCHOOLS WHERE EVERYONE BELONGS

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Workshop given at the 1992 Annual Conference of the Canadian Education Association, October 7th, Bonaventure Hilton Hotel, Montréal.

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When I accepted a few months ago the invitation to speak at this conference, it was with a great deal of pleasurable anticipation. In fact, the topic of diversity in education was of great interest to me, much had already been said and written about the increased diversity of school populations and statistics were readily available here in Quebec as well as across Canada. At the time, the task before me appeared essentially one of pulling together both my interest and the available knowledge. Furthermore, I was pleased at the opportunity of participating in the celebration of one hundred years of educational thought and debate within this association. Little did I know how slippery the topic would prove, how confusing the discourse that surrounds it and how deceptive my own perception of the facts.

In the end, I have decided not to review educational policies geared at promoting respect for diversity, nor to review statistics on the integration of students with special needs or on the ethnic composition of our classrooms. I have come to the conclusion that dealing with diversity in education may require less a review of what we already know than an analysis of our most fundamental assumptions about students, about schools and about ourselves.

This morning, I am going to argue two major points. The first is that schools are an important, but not exclusive, source of personal identity and group integration and that schools are better-equipped to be or become contributors to both individual and group identities than they are to be agents of general social integration at the service of goals other than their own. Second, I will argue that the central goal of schools is the provision of quality education to the students which attend them and that a clear focus on this goal reframes the issue of diversity in a way that should lead us to become both more confident and more creative in our interactions with students who come to our schools with varied abilities, special needs or handicaps or from ethnic and family backgrounds different from those we most readily understand.

Before I do that, however, I want to take a few minutes to retrace my own efforts at coming to terms with the topic. First, I accepted the widely-held view that our student clientele was increasingly diverse - while still remembering that there was a larger percentage of immigrants in Canada in 1931 than there is today. I also accepted the view that this increased diversity created pressure on the existing social contract, both explicit in the laws and regulations governing education and implicit in the norms and values governing school life.

I saw the tension which many educators report between respect for a student's "difference" and the need for group norms - tension evident in situations not easily resolved by simple genuine concern for the well-being of both individuals and the group in any given classroom. Across Canada, teachers responsible for integrating students with special needs into regular classrooms are reporting their own struggles with fair and equal treatment of all students when one or more seem to require so much more of their time. At the same time, groups of parents of special needs students legitimately demand that their children receive high quality instruction geared to their needs but offered in the most regular setting possible.

Across cities, teachers and principals are also reporting their unease at being the frontline agents of the social integration not only of immigrant children but also of their families. At the same time governments remind us of the need to maintain or increase levels of immigration over the coming years as a way of preventing demographic loss and of ensuring economic prosperity. In addition to requiring special models of language instruction, some of these children also have experienced various degrees of hardship and weak prior education and require special forms of educational support. Some of them also come from families and social networks which hold religious and cultural beliefs at

odds with those of the school.

What does one do when faced with a girl whose parents wish her to be exempted not only from religion class but also from gym class on the grounds that boisterous physical activity is unseemly in women? And what criteria does one use to judge parenting behaviour when such behaviour is often at the core of the ethnic and cultural identity?

Second, at a more macro level, I have been as involved as many with debates on the provision of heritage language programs, on the need to introduce inter-cultural realities and values in our core curriculum, to ensure that curriculum is free of both gender and ethnic bias and on the need to train teachers for dealing with diversity in the classroom. Debates around such issues are often marked by the presence of strong and organized lobby groups representative of a broad spectrum of beliefs and values, both at a local level and at a provincial level.

Third, but intimately related to these issues, I have participated in discussions surrounding employment equity for women, for minorities and for the handicapped and heard a range of arguments both in favour and in opposition to affirmative action programs of various types.

Finally, I myself hold a position created to serve the best interests of a minority clientele, students in English schools in Quebec and in that role I am an advocate for respect and understanding of different views and traditions.

Equipped with that kind of experience, I might be forgiven for believing that I knew what I believed about dive sity in education and that I could easily review the issues and propose conclusions. What I found instead is that the issues are elusive, the facts paradoxical and the conclusions often misleading.

The first challenge, in an exercise such as this one, is to come to terms with the concept of diversity. What do we understand to be the phenomenon of diversity and why do we generally believe it is on the increase? Diversity is a concept tied to our perception of relative difference between one object, person or group and another. A large number of perceived differences will lead us to claim that this set of objects or persons or groups is diverse. The problem lies in the dependence on our perception of differences and the extent to which such perception is shaped by experience and prior learning, shaped by the past more than by the future.

A little over twenty years ago, I left Montreal to live and teach in the Caribbean and ran into the kind of perception that made black students and colleagues regularly mistake me for an American woman with whom all I thought I had in common was height and hair color. An interesting variation on the theme of all X people look alike. Clearly, perception here was governed by my whiteness, a characteristic I couldn't possibly deny but one which up until that point had never formed part of the identity I would have given myself.

At the same time, I found myself acquiring another identity I did not readily understand. I was an expatriate wife - now I would guess that most people who have never left Canada do not have a very well-defined concept of expatriate even if they might of wife. Where I lived, expatriate wives were not only subject to specific working conditions - i.e. permanent employment without either pension benefits or contract bonuses - but the majority population perceived this category as a group, likely to have more in common with each other than anyone of them might have with local black colleagues. Expatriate wives, however, were often British and, at the time, I knew even less about Britain than I did about the Caribbean.

There are two observations to be made here. The first is that the perception of difference is not an objective act; the second is that one may be perceived to be different in a way one recognizes as neither legitimate nor familiar. Clearly, my experience had not prepared me to define myself as either primarily white or expatriate. This makes sense if one realizes that in the predominantly white world in which I grew up, whiteness could not be used as a sorter and that given Canadian immigration policies, expatriates in the sense understood in the Caribbean are not a category.

If we transpose the lesson I learned to realities in our schools, we are bound to ask two questions: do the children we see as diverse see themselves and accept themselves as different in the same way and who is doing the sorting into same and different? Is it legitimate to make race and ethnic origin a sorter of differences for young people who may have arrived in Canada at a very young age, grown up on Sesame Street and video games, spent much of their time on city subways and watching sit-coms and music videos, wearing jeans and t-shirts? Which of their identities is strongest and which do they themselves choose? Young people I know seem to define themselves and each other at least as much by the kind of music they like as by anything else.

And is it legitimate to create a category of students for whom having a handicap is an identity we give them when in reality educating a child who happens to be in a wheelchair poses no problem in common with educating one who is profoundly deaf. Many adults I know who have a handicap but also have rewarding jobs and careers appear to me to define themselves more often by their jobs or careers than by their handicaps. This doesn't mean, of course, that they don't accept their handicap; only that it is not a core self-chosen identity. Women in senior management understood that phenomenon all too well - the one where you are being forced to

define yourself as either primarily a woman or primarily a manager with all the accompanying tension such a forced choice brings, as though these two identities did not, in fact, merge easily. People of mixed ethnic, linguistic or religious backgrounds - of which there can only be more in the coming years - face a similar difficulty, that of being asked what they are, really. As though one could not be both white and black, as though one always had to choose one over the other.

Diversity or pluralism has always existed - it is in fact the counterpoint of personal uniqueness and identity. Our perception of difference, however, shifts with prevailing modes of thought and beliefs about the "natural" composition of the society or the group in which we live. It is that "natural" composition of our schools which is shifting and calling it diversity mostly emphasizes our patterns of labeling rather than our sources of shared humanity.

The perception of diversity depends on the variables we use to sort and sorting we do, and on the degree to which certain features are judged by others as critical elements in a decision about sameness and difference.

Somewhere, somehow, human beings have always had an instinct or a need to sort other human beings into us and them, same and different. And whenever we do, we easily fall prey to the mistaken belief that our manner of sorting is somehow self-evident, inevitable - and objective. Yet differences which to us may seem trivial once were seen as significant enough to prevent a marriage or start a war - and in some places may still be. It would be odd indeed to us if all of a sudden Catholics and Protestants in this country were to systematically live in separate towns or neighbourhoods or to take to the streets in arms. And yet, in Northern Ireland, they do.

The core issue then is not so much about increased objective diversity and how we might deal with it as it is about how groups create cohesion and the limits of a group's ability to integrate new members. It is also about how individuals choose both individual identities and group loyalties and how others sometimes impose identities on us.

From the outside of a group, all its "insiders" appear the same; yet, from the inside, groups re-form, re-integrating and excluding others. The director of Jewish Day Schools here in Montreal once told me of a recently-arrived immigrant student who was heard complaining about his school. He said, "Back in my Russian school, I was a dirty Jew: here, in a Jewish school, I'm a dirty Russian."

The process of group formation with its attendant gestures of inclusion and exclusion goes on all the time, in all aspects of our lives. And it goes on in schools. The individual process of selecting identification with a group or rejecting it also goes on all the time and in all aspects of our lives. And it also goes on in schools. It is out of these interactions that identity is shaped and sameness and difference take on concrete meaning for us as individuals and for us as members of any given group.

What I believe has in fact increased, primarily as a result of the massive increase in global communications and the ease with which technology brings us into contact with new choices and different world views, is the extent to which we now carry multiple identities and live our lives within more groups than ever before. Each of us is like a prism, reflecting at times one aspect of our identity and then another. Each of us has a family identity, a linguistic and cultural identity - or more than one, a religious identity, a professional identity, one or more special interests identities and so on. And in each of these we find that we have at

least some things in common with others from whom we may differ in many other respects. All of us here are educators and for us that is an important identity and source of cohesion and easy communication; yet, each of us probably has other group loyalties which we could not easily integrate into this group.

Fifty years ago, in my father's home fishing village in Newfoundland, identity might have been simpler and less variable. Some families had been fishing for a hundred years, some belonged to one church and some to another. Some were a little richer, most were very poor. Women did much the same work as other women, the future was expected to be much like the present, and everyone pretty much knew what to expect from one another.

It is not so much diversity that has increased as it is the number of choices we now have, the range of views and of models we might follow. Not all women stay at home to raise their children, not all black men in Canada work for the railway, not all Asians operate laundries and not all gardeners are Italian, and not all the disabled live together.

These changes have brought greater depth and texture to the social fabric, have eased injustice and breathed energy into our world but they require of us that we accept that identity and group membership is no longer a singular feature; rather personal identity and overall integration into society is made up of various strands of identities and group loyalties - for all of us.

It is for this reason that I think that the problem of diversity is badly posed when the school is asked to be an agent of general social integration. For whom is the school meant to integrate and into what? To pose the problem that way forces us into a majority-minority debate, some form of power struggle in favour of an idea of a majority and all too often a stereotypical view of any one minority group or, in the case of women, a

stereotypical view of a group that is not a minority. It also leads us to see others through their group affiliation rather than respond to their individual uniqueness.

A more useful framework is one in which school itself is one identity and those who live in it part of a cohesive group of their own - and this, in addition to or even perhaps in contrast to identities and group memberships students or teachers might have outside the school setting.

For this to happen, as it must whenever groups form and set inclusion-exclusion boundaries and whenever individuals identify with a group, the common ground must be a definition of sameness, not difference, of commonality, not diversity. In an article drawn from a conference presentation by Gregory Baum, at the International Seminar on Religious Education and Values in Banff, 1992, on Religious Pluralism and Common Values, he makes the point that we only become ready to recognise others as "other" at the moment we discover they share a common humanity with us and that it is the experience of sameness that generates respect for difference. Charles Taylor, in *The Malaise of Modernity*, makes a related point:

> To come together on a mutual recognition of difference - that is, of the equal value of different identities - requires that we share more than a belief in this principle; we have to share also some standards of value on which the identities concerned check out as equal. There must be some substantive agreement on value or else the formal principle of equality will be empty and a sham. We can pay lip-service to equal recognition, but we won't really share an understanding of equality unless we share something more. Recognizing difference, like self-choosing, requires a horizon of significance, in this case a shared one. (Taylor, C., *The Malaise of*

Modernity, CBC Massey Lecture Series; 1991. House of Anansi Press Limited.)

This, in my view, is the real challenge of the school: the creation of a shared horizon of significance, the creation of a sameness of goals, values and needs. Schools must create a school identity, for students as well as for their teachers, which lies not in opposition to other identities each might chose or be assigned, but in addition or even in contrast to these. This identity can only be based on group formation interactions arising out of a set of clear and simple values held dear at least at the level of the school and related to the school's primary function: to educate young people so that they can live, work and pursue their own growth in the world around them.

I have faith that, under such conditions, the students we think of as diverse will not find themselves in conflict of identity, but rather will discover, as many of us already have, that our lives are made up of multiple identities, each coming forth and receding depending on the goals we are pursuing at a given time and the context in which we carry out our activities. Self-identity is a blend, not a label. I also believe we do more damage than good when we impose on children a single identity, even when our intentions are essentially respectful. Only under such conditions can we give children the opportunity to explore their different identities and create for themselves a "shared horizon of significance" with others whom in some ways they resemble and from whom, in some ways they differ.

Our concern now must be for the establishment of a successful school contract, one which sets out the goals of education and makes these clear to students and one which supports the development of a group identity at the school in which sameness and commonality are stressed over difference and diversity. I'd like to look now at model for group formation interactions to illustrate what goes on when such contracts are negotiated.

A Model of Interactions When There Is a Perception of <u>Sameness</u>

	Groups	**Individuals**
Groups	Form a larger group (COHESION)	Integrate new member (INTEGRATION)
Individuals	Identify with and belong (IDENTIFICATION)	Treat equally (EQUALITY)

MODEL A

Fig. 1

A Model of Interactions When There Is a Perception of Difference

	Groups	**Individuals**
Groups	1. Extend group boundaries and seek cohesion or 2. Close group boundaries and negotiate shared power.	1. Extend group boundaries and include new member or 2. Close group boundaries and exclude new member
Individuals	1. Change to be accepted by group or 2. Reject group	1. Find sources of sameness and treat equally or 2. Treat differently (can be respectful or not; discriminatory or not)

MODEL B

Fig. 2

It should be clear from the two figures that building schools is considerably easier under the interactions of Model A. In such a school, parents are like the teachers and students are much like what the teachers' own children might be. Such a school experiences cohesion, and integrates its students well; students, in return, identify with the school and treat each other as equals. Doubtless, I have said earlier enough to suggest that such a school is an ideal, perhaps more closely reached by private schools with stringent admission requirements and rights to expel anyone who threatens the school's cohesion than could ever be the case in a modern public school, but, even for these schools, this model must remain an ideal.

Furthermore, there was no golden age in which such schools abounded. Reading over the proceedings of this association's conference a hundred years ago, I found ample evidence to suggest that diversity was a reality even then, though it is more often couched in terms of wealth, social class and the fitness of mothers than it might be today.

Model A presumes that there is no effort geared at identifying sameness and shared values and goals and that this sameness somehow just happened and allowed the school to perform its function of educating students with minimal interference from values and beliefs at odds with those of the school.

Model B presents alternatives more in line with what I believe is the reality of today's schools. If we accept the premise that we live in a world where each of us has multiple identities, then school cohesion, its ability to integrate new members to the school community as well as individuals' willingness to seek group identification with the school and to treat others as they expect to be treated in the school is something we must work towards, not something we can take for granted.

What strikes me in this analysis, however, is that the achievement of these goals is still predicated on a search for similarities, a source of sameness, because the maintenance of a discourse of difference has quite other consequences. Yet, at the same time, it appears that the commonly held view in discussions of diversity focuses more on respecting difference than on identifying common ground. This is the option two line of Model B.

In conditions where what dominates our action is the perception of difference, when groups interact with groups - parents and teachers or teachers and students - the dominant interaction is almost inevitably a series of on-going negotiations about sharing power. In such a school, the principal is all too often arbitrator of conflicting views. This is made more and more inevitable when, "just by accident", all teachers are white and belong to one ethnic or religious group when the majority of parents belong to other ethnic or religious groups. And this is why we still need to be concerned with employment equity and affirmative action. Not only because groups are demanding it, but because our schools would actually function better if there were no facile lines to draw between the composition of one set of partners and the composition of another.

Such lines give a powerful message that group membership is dependent on variables outside the control of individuals who might otherwise want to be part of a common, cohesive, school group. In schools, it is the adults who have the most power. Schools are also children's first experience with structured social organization outside the home. When those who have power share none of the differences shared by those who have less, we create the perfect conditions for social tension, both inside the school now and outside it later. We create the perception that the individual doesn't matter as much as does his or her group membership. An individual who perceives that is likely to believe that his or her

only source of power lies in aligning himself or herself even more stringently with the group that accepts him or her, thereby reinforcing majority-minority stresses and struggles.

It is also easier for a Greek teacher to speak to a Greek parent about issues the parent might want to call cultural when in fact these might more often be personal. The same is true in interactions between teachers and students. It is still considerably easier for a black teacher to comment on aspects of the black experience than it is for a white one.

The groups which make up the school, students, teachers, parents and principal must find a way to extend the boundaries of their own more personal, social, or cultural identities and form a group of their own. Only under such conditions can we maximize the extent to which students will identify with school and see school as one source of identity that does not threaten other sources but offers instead, the possibility of a successful education, a solid quality of life and the confidence it takes to live and grow comfortably in a world which offers many choices and many challenges.

Only under such conditions can the school go about its business in the eye of the hurricane that blows social change around it instead of being blown by winds it cannot control. Only under the paradoxical conditions of seeking less to negotiate all aspects of social change, from family structure to ethnic identity, can it provide students with the courage and confidence to grow up into citizens capable of accommodating to an ever-changing world and negotiating their own identities and group loyalties. Only by being more of a teaching and learning institution and less of an agent for social peace can schools, in fact, contribute to social peace and harmonious social integration of all. I want to stress here that what this requires is not the elimination of difference, some form of cultural imperialism that seeks to assimilate all

differences . On the contrary, my ideal school treads lightly on other people's beliefs. It doesn't seek to assimilate; only to teach. It limits its actions geared at defining common goals and values to those areas which directly affect teaching and learning in that school. And it works to include in its curriculum a large dose of critical thinking. Not the "politically correct" approach we have heard so much about from debates now raging in the United States, but a tradition of critical thought.

Schools have a purpose that is clear. Schools are institutions designed to educate children and young people so that they have the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to lead productive lives, lives in which they can seek personal fulfillment while respecting obligations to contribute to the well-being of society. Schools serve students. But to do this requires more than just saying it; students must believe, in a very fundamental way, that the school is a good place to be, that it cares for its members, that the group is committed to each one of its members. The rate of high-school drop-outs, here in Quebec at close to 35%, and still quite high elsewhere, suggests that many young people do not believe that school is a good place to be.

Our first order of business then must be the creation of schools where children and young people want to be. I do not mean by this that schools should be more fun, or engage in an attractiveness competition with the mall or the arcade, only that schools must care about their students and that students must feel cared about. In addition to dropping out of school, increasing numbers of students also run away from home and in no case of running away have we heard that it is discipline or rigour in the family that triggered the flight. Almost always, it is pain or at least, the pain that came before the anger.

Schools must have rules, must demand rigor, but they must also care and have faith. Students who drop out report not only boredom

but injustice and the feeling that no one really cared. Last year, I had the opportunity of hearing young people talk about their schools during a series of public meetings organized by the Task Force on English education in Quebec and I was struck by the number of times students reported teacher remarks such as this one; "Well, OK, I don't care what you do; I'll get paid anyhow". Now, having been not only a teacher but a parent, I can understand the remark - and probably I have made similar frustrated, dismissive remarks of my own when faced with adolescent stubbornness and rebellion - but what struck me most was the tremendous hurt students who reported such remarks had felt, and I had to remember that no matter how rebellious or difficult a young boy or girl might seem, much of that is still bravado and everyone still wants to be valued. Teenagers do not come from another planet, in spite of their hair, their music, their torn-up jeans and bad eating habits. And they do want to belong. The question is how to make them belong to the school rather than the street. What is clear is that we cannot do that by rejecting what they are.

Schools must be places where students feel cared about and they must also be places where there are rules and where rules are not necessarily liked but are seen as fair. But beyond that, schools must teach. Teaching has become more and more of a challenge in a society in which children have grown up on the instant information mode or the "entertain-me-first" requirement of television, but schools must teach. At the risk of running against the tide, I am a firm believer in the "learn first and self-esteem will follow" model rather than its reverse. We must believe there is still joy and confidence and pride to be found in work well-done or an arduous task completed well or what we are doing is a sham. We must talk to students about their accomplishments more than about their potential and for that to happen, there has to be a school ethos of accomplishment.

There is no placebo for real personal achievement or hard-won

accomplishment and students recognize empty praise as quickly as they recognize poor teaching. To require too little of them is also, too often, to demand too little of ourselves. Schools are places where both students and teachers work and learn and students must know that.

I would place these two values at the core: schools are good places to be and schools are places where we teach and learn. Beyond that, all schools have many tools available to them to build an educational project - as Quebec law calls what others may call the mission statement of a school. Schools build identity in many ways: struggling for parent involvement, offering extra-curricular activities, producing school yearbooks, choosing school colours, printing a school newspaper, supporting sports and community services. There are a thousand different ways of making a school be more than a building and not many require money. What they do require is a vision of the school as a group, an identity, as a place of common values and strong interpersonal loyalty.

Such a school doesn't worry about diversity. It doesn't try to do what it cannot - and it cannot play the role of social integrator for society as whole - but it does do what it is meant to do well. Such a school deals with difference, not in terms of majority-minority rights or even in terms of right and wrong judgements about different beliefs, but by measuring the extent to which its decisions contribute to the well-being of the student, to his or her sense of belonging to the school, to his or her freedom to have more than one identity and by the extent to which its decisions contribute to teaching and learning. And it trusts the young people that leave to build their own identities, to find their own meanings for diversity, to make choices about who and what they are that can make their lives richer and fuller, and to face a society that is increasingly complex with faith and confidence.